

The Front Page

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Comedy & Music in Georgia

by Penny Jeannechild, Gay News

The second annual Southern Women's Music and Comedy Festival (held over Memorial Day Weekend at a private camp near Cleveland, Georgia) was dedicated to "all the victims and survivors of the Holocaust." Given the seriousness of the dedication, one would have expected a heavy political tone to the weekend's offerings.

Instead, a "girls just want to have fun" atmosphere was created through the efforts of Robin Tyler, Lisa Ulrich-Marsh and Robin's former partner-in-comedy, Pat Harrison.

Not that the serious was lacking. Some dozen workshops covered topics such as women with inherited wealth, substance abuse, nutrition, illiteracy and gynecologic health. But there were balanced with fun: workshops on putting together a band, improvisational new games, sports and dulcimer playing.

The day and evening stage performances provided refreshing mix of punk, rock, folk, square dance, jazz, reggae, country and disco. Opening night brought Ferron, Tret Fure and Cris Williamson to the main stage. Williamson's performance was lackluster and unsatisfying: she was obviously in need of a vacation. It may be time to give the "headliners" a break; enough new and talented women strutted their stuff at this weekend to fill and auditorium any night of the week.

Without a doubt, the highlight of the weekend was a spontaneous jam on Saturday night between Alive!, the jazz ensemble, and the Afro-American/reggae group, Edwina Tyler and A Piece of the World. For a solid 15 minutes, the sound of women's yells, whistles, hoots and hollers joined the throb of drums to reverberate throughout the camp.

This wasn't called a music and comedy festival for nothing. Festival producer Robin Tyler is a stand-up comic in the tradition of Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor and Joan Rivers: she cracks, pokes, prods, shoots and retreats, tagging onto her more pointed jokes, "Just kidding!"

On sale at the festival was the hottest item going: a poster of Robin, thumb in waistband, looking gorgeous and butch as hell, captioned, "If it was good enough for Eleanor Roosevelt, it's good enough for me."



Comic Damitra Vance

Tyler wasn't greedy about her star status. The producers brought to the festival the Laurel and Hardy-like comedy team of Delaria and Stroble, the outrageously funny grab-something-from-a-bag-and-turn-it-into-a-joke Judy Carter (recently seek on Merv Griffin) and a special treat for me, a black comic, Damitra Vance. She played her soft and shy personal style against brilliant flashes of insight, leaving the audience to a delightful ovation.

Other personal highlights were the presence of Alicia Bridges, whose Top 40's hit "I Love the Nightlife" tore the house down; Castleberry and Dupree, two D.C.-based singers who blend the low and husky with the open-throated and pure; and Toshi Reagon, a young singer/writer guitar/drums musician/genius who stands to be the Stevie Wonder of her generation.

I think perhaps the producers overestimated the potential racism of southern women when they decided to confine black women to the afternoon main stage. No black performer appeared at night; Edwina Tyler and A Piece of the World, an all black group, were invited to jam on Saturday night after Alive's performance was over. I share the sentiments of one black performer who noted that the white "headliners" have begun to burn-out and that it is those names which attract women to festivals. If more black performers had been highlighted over the years, they could now be pulling women to these events. Instead, they are still performing during the afternoon, when they have to compete with workshops, sports, swimming and nude sunbathing. As a result, a majority of the women leave with no exposure to the black performers.

Robin Tyler has a solid record in human rights; one can only assume that the situation will be rectified by next year.

The final memory I bring home is of Robin Tyler, standing on a small outdoor stage with a lake at her back, trees shadowing her face, teaching us the history and importance of political comedy in the United States, then admonishing lesbians to return to their hometowns and "Come out. The more there are of us, the safer it's gonna get."

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